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ABSTRACT

Teacher/student conferences in composition at their best involve a shared commitment involving both teacher and student in developing meaning in the student's writing and are an improvement over theme annotation, which separates writer and reader and tends to cast the teacher in the role of respondent with judgmental powers. However, unless teachers and students share the process of developing meaning in writing, it is probable that the teacher will dominate the conference. By cooperating and collaborating with students, teachers can avoid the possibility of dominating the psychological processes involved in shaping or forming meaning in writing. Teachers must let students do most of the talking during the conference, and the subject of that talk most often must be the subject of the student's writing, not the conventions of written language. (Transcripts of teacher/student interactions are included.) (TJ)

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THE TEACHER-STUDENT CONFERENCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING IN WRITING

A Paper Presented at the
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The Teacher-Student Conference and the Development of Meaning in Writing

One significant trend in the teaching of written composition in the past decade is the movement away from theme annotation toward oral response to students about their writing. The literature on writing and its teaching describes many approaches using oral response, among the most important of which are peer feedback and the teacher-student conference. Both of those approaches, it is argued, make reader response to student writing more immediate and relevant, and therefore more likely to lead to effective revision, than the traditional method of writing comments on student papers.

My purpose is to take a close look at the conferencing form of teacher oral response to student writing in order to emphasize the necessity of a shared commitment involving the teacher as reader and student as writer. The commitment focuses on the development of meaning in the student's writing. It is that shared commitment, furthermore, that makes oral response more valuable than theme annotation.

Theme annotation separates writer and reader and tends to cast the teacher in the role of respondent with judgmental powers. Oral response opens up the possibility of teacher cooperation and collaboration with students as they write and revise. Fulfilling that possibility, however, is not automatic. The point I want to make and illustrate is this: Unless teachers and student writers share the process of developing meaning in writing during the teacher-student conference it is probable that teachers will dominate that process. Such dominance suggests that teachers, not students, are learning to make writing meaningful.

My basic assumption is that meaning must be formed, and not just communicated, by writers. The conventions of standard written English that permit communication between writer and reader are certainly important. Those conventions govern the presentation of logic and language in writing and allow the writer to meet the informational needs and syntactic and orthographic expectations of readers. The ability to make writing conform to the conventions of standard written English, however, is as much a consequence as a cause of learning to communicate through writing. Instruction which concentrates only on the conventions and on eliminating deviations may be inimical to the learning of writing. That instruction teaches students how to make writing conform to conventions rather than how to make writing. Students might not learn that writing carries meaning and that meaning must be formed by the writer.

Learning to write involves gaining control over the formation of meaning in writing. For inexperienced writers, regardless of age level, written linguistic meaning is formed through a necessary dependence on spoken language (Vygotsky 1934/1962; 1978). Inexperienced writers need everyday speech, its sound and syntax, and its context dependent representation of meaning, in order to write. The option of representing meaning in spoken or written language is simply not present for beginning writers, and they must rely on speech in order to produce writing. Learning to control the formation of meaning in writing, thus, includes learning to develop the context dependent forms of spoken language into the autonomous and explicit forms of written language (Olson, 1977).

Written language transactions must contain much more of the psychological and social contexts of language than does everyday spoken language.

Writing lacks the visual and aural supports of speech and the collaboration between speakers often characteristic of spoken dialog. Writing must contain fuller meanings that speech, and therefore writers must learn to make fuller meanings in writing than in speaking.

For beginning writers, speech and writing are interactive. That observation suggests that oral response to student writing by teachers ought to be more effective than theme annotation in teaching writing skills. It is not a simple difference between spoken and written responses to student writing, however, that matters as much as the type of conversation between teacher and student. It is possible that talk between teacher and student makes spoken and written language counteractive, and not interactive.

That possibility emerges when the teacher does most of the talking during the teacher-student conference and when spoken language forms are viewed only as the source of deviations from the conventions of standard written English (as they are, for example, in Shaughnessy, 1977). By concentrating on spoken language forms, identified as errors, and by doing most of the talking, teachers might deprive students of the chance to make writing meaningful by talking the subject of writing through with a concerned reader. In that case teachers dominate the development of meaning in writing.

That dominance, and a resulting teacher control over the formation of meaning in student writing, are illustrated in the following transcript* which presents an excerpt from a taped conference between a teacher and

*This transcript is a portion of an audio tape recorded during a regular tenth grade composition class in a large urban high school. Like the writing discussed in the transcript, the tape was produced under normal classroom conditions. Brackets are used in the transcript to coordinate the tape with the student's writing and with the teacher's written changes of that writing.

a tenth grade writer. The subject of the conference is the first draft of a paragraph written by the student as part of an essay entitled, "Selecting a Drum Set":

You should try to get something in "your class". Time 1
after time people make that mistake. They will either get 2
a set that is too small and unexpandable. By this I mean 3
that it is hard to add on to your set, or they will get 4
one that is so big that they don't know what to do with 5
them. 6

That paragraph changes as the teacher and student discuss it during the conference. The teacher opens with a statement of written language convention:

Teacher--When you use an "either," you have to come up with an 1
"or," and if you don't come up with an "or," your sentence is 2
incomplete. 3
Student--Or. [Apparently pointing to that word in the text, 4
line 4] 5
T--But it's way down here, and this is a capital [By, line 3]. 6
This threw me off. Did you mean another sentence here? 7
S--No; I think I meant a comma, see, see cause I... 8
T--But this is really a separate sentence. 9
S--Right, but when I said "unexpandable," I wanted to, uh, tell'em 10
what I meant by "unexpandable," you know. 'Cause I didn't want 11
to just leave it like that, 'cause then they'll be thinking 12
What does he mean by "unexpandable"? 13

T--Ok, you're right. So let's see if there's a better way that we can do it, because you've actually injected a separate sentence in here, and you should make it a clause.

S--So, so why don't I just, um, take out "unexpandable" and put in the meaning instead, saying, "it's too small, and it's too hard to add on to..."

T--Right. All you...

S--And so forth.

T--Right. All you need to do is cross out this [crosses out By this I mean that it is, lines 3 and 4.] "They will either get a set that too small and unexpandable" comma "hard to add on to." And that explains that [Apparently pointing to revision of student's sentence, lines 2, 3, 4.]

S--Well I...

T--This is a... Set off by commas, "unexpandable, hard to add on to." It's an explanation of enexpandable, "or" [Brief pause] Now, you can't do this. "Them" is a plural. You've started by talking about "a set." Set is singular, so you have to come up with a singular pronoun, because it refers back to "set." Unless you want to change "sets" to a plural: "They will either get sets that are too small and unexpandable, or"

S--I think I'd rather keep that "a set." What word for "them"?

T--It. "They will get one that is so big that they don't know what to do with it."

The student's paragraph changes during the course of that conversation. The changes, adding an appositional phrase in place of a prepositional phrase, and making the plural them singular, are made by the teacher. In the case of the plural, the teacher lets the student decide. In the case

of the apposition, the student, according to his comment in lines 17, 18, and 19 of the tape, would if permitted change his paragraph differently. The second draft of the paragraph, however, reflects the teacher's changes:

> You should try to get something in "your class". Time 1
> after time people make that mistake. They will either get 2
> a set that is too small and unexpandable, hard to add on to, 3
> or they will get one that is so big that they don't know what 4
> to do with it. 5

During a subsequent conference, the teacher responds to that second draft and says, "I would combine these two," in reference to the first two sentences. She changes that to the in line 2, they will to of in line 2, and eliminates will in line 4. The student's third draft incorporates those changes:

> You should try to get something in "your class". Time 1
> after time people make the mistake of either getting a set that 2
> is too small and unexpandable, hard to add on to, or they get one 3
> that is so big that they don't know what to do with it. 4

If the first, second, and third drafts of the student's paragraph are compared, we can notice that meaning has evolved from the context-bound and idiosyncratic to the explicit and well-formed. The third draft communicates more clearly and violates fewer writing conventions than the others. The writer, though, has not made those improvements. The teacher has.

The teacher dominates both the quantity and the quality of talk as she responds to the student's writing. The student does not get much of

a chance to identify and form his meaning. The commitment to the development of meaning is not shared by teacher and student in this example. Rather, control over the formation of meaning in writing passes quickly from the student to the teacher.

The argument for teacher-student cooperation in the development of meaning rests primarily in the assumption that linguistic meaning must be formed, and not just packaged for delivery to listeners or readers. Meaning is formed in writing through a complex set of psychological dynamics involving the writer's experience and perception, thought and feeling, spoken words and written words. Those dynamics, furthermore, interact with the social dynamics of the composition classroom (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977). It is possible that the social dynamics, the teacher-student conference, dominate the psychological processes involved in shaping or forming meaning in writing. By cooperating and collaborating with students, teachers can help to avoid that possibility.

The trend toward oral response to student writing is a good and useful one, as the literature reporting on that trend suggests. Replacing theme annotation with teacher-student conferencing is often to be recommended, especially in light of the inexperienced writer's dependence on spoken language. Still, the conference by itself is not enough. Teachers must let students do most of the talking during the conference, and the subject of that talk most often must be the subject of the student's writing, not the conventions of written language.

By becoming cooperative and concerned readers and listeners, teachers can help students learn to develop meaning in written language. That means collaborating with student writers—helping, questioning, supporting—in the formation of meaning. In that manner teachers can help students learn to control the development of meaning while their writing is in progress.

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